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The Christian Hermeneutics of Cranmer's Homilies

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Abstract

This article explores some of the hermeneutical resources of the two official books of homilies, authorised to be preached in the BCP communion service. The historical contexts and successive editions of the books are explained, and a focused reading is offered of the key texts relevant to the interpretation of scripture. Some consideration is given to other related texts that highlight Cranmer's hermeneutical approach. It is suggested that Cranmer's use of scripture is not in practice the approach he commends in the first homily, but is driven by concerns with attaining the 'right' doctrine of justification. A key issue is the interplay between readerly character, deferral to wise readers,

and the pressure of the text against particular traditions. It is argued that the *Books of Homilies* here offer rich material for reflection upon the nature of Christian hermeneutics in one particular ecclesial tradition, and indicate an Anglican approach to scripture that has much to offer.

keywords: Books of Homilies; Cranmer; hermeneutics; character; tradition; ecclesiology

‘Yet is there nothing so impertinently uttered in all the whole book of the Bible, but may serve to spiritual purpose in some respect to all such as will bestow their labours to search out the meanings.’

(Homily II/10: *An Information for them which take Offence at certain places of the Holy Scripture*; Griffiths, p. 380)

1. Introduction: Encountering the Homilies Today

Those familiar with the BCP Communion liturgy will know that the service passes from its opening prayers of various kinds, through the epistle and the gospel, and arrives at the creed, after which we read, in the rubric:

Then shall follow the Sermon, or one of the Homilies already set forth, or hereafter to be set forth, by authority. (BCP, 241)

After a selection of scriptural sentences, the service then proceeds towards communion.

In this the BCP and its forerunners sought to emphasise the prime significance of the sermon as part of the appropriate worship of the gathered people of God, and in one form or another the sermon has remained a key part of the Anglican communion service ever since.

The other way in which the homilies might most easily be encountered is through article 35 of the 39 articles: *Of the Homilies*. The Elizabethan origin of the 39 articles pinpoints the date of this statement of a listing of the contents of a 'second Book of Homilies', the titles of which are then given, and alerts the reader to 'the former Book of Homilies, which were set forth in the time of Edward the Sixth'.¹ Interestingly the articles do not reveal the titles from that former book, other than a mention in article 11 of 'the Homily of Justification', referring to Cranmer's statement 'Of the salvation of mankind' (I/3) as the locus for a proper understanding of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone.

It would be interesting to know whether any of 'the Homilies already set forth' are ever preached these days. Trinity Episcopal School of Ministry, in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, has in recent years undertaken to record video versions of some of these homilies, as part of a Lenten discipline (which is rather an interesting comment on them

¹ The precise dating of the Books of Homilies is noted below, where it will be relevant to be aware that the articles progressed in (at least) three recensions: a largely Cranmerian original 42 articles in 1553 (in Latin though also prepared in English); a 1563 Latin edition; and a slightly expanded English edition in 1571. See Oliver O'Donovan, *On the 39 Articles. A Conversation with Tudor Christianity* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986), pp. 10-11.

in itself), and several are readily available on-line.² It is likely that the average Anglican church, of any theological persuasion, would find the use of such an authorised homily rather odd, and jarring for reasons of tone and style (let alone length). There will of course be theological traditions within Anglican churches that at least find the theology congenial, especially where the Reformed tradition of thought that shaped so much early Church of England theology is held dear.

It is not just churches awaiting the sermon who would be surprised to receive an authorised homily. Students of Anglicanism, including those training for ordained ministry, can easily pass through their entire theological formation without engaging with this theological resource. For those with interests in Anglican approaches to scripture, this is a striking oddity.

The present piece explores this under-utilised resource in dialogue with wider theological and hermeneutical questions. Recent interest in the theological interpretation of scripture has come slowly to the recognition that the Christian sermon has long been one prime location for wrestling with scripture with an eye on the hermeneutical issues of letting the biblical text speak to the present moment. In the words of Stephen Fowl:

theological interpretation of Scripture never really stopped. Although it was largely exiled from academic biblical studies, Christians have been interpreting Scripture theologically because their identity as Christians compels them to do so. ... the sermon is

² About half of Book I is currently at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QyISZiMF4&list=PL57041BBD113F61B3> Accessed January 17 2017.

one of the primary exemplars of theological interpretation in the pre-modern period. ... A challenge for the future of theological interpretation concerns in what ways sermons can become a mode for serious scholarly theological interpretation.³

From one context, several centuries ago but at a formational time in the development of at least one church tradition, comes a collection of sermons (or at least texts that are presented as sermons) that are fascinatingly both old and new in their hermeneutical moves: *The Book of Homilies*.

2. The Book of Homilies: Historical Background; Initial Orientation; Editions

The authorised homilies referred to in the BCP were in fact two books: an Edwardian one overseen by Cranmer (*Certain Sermons or Homelies*) and an Elizabethan second volume.⁴ Book I was published on 31 July 1547, just six months after Edward VI took the throne (on 28 Jan 1547), and consists of 12 homilies. It sets out a clear statement of official belief through its opening theological series of homilies on doctrinal matters – especially I/2–I/5, mainly attributed to Cranmer himself, although all

³ Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Cascade Companion; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), p. 22 (first quote) and p. 73 (last two quotes).

⁴ The most convenient and up-to-date source for the information that follows is Ashley Null, 'Official Tudor Homilies', in Peter McCullough, Hugh Adlington and Emma Rhatigan (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 348-65. The same author offers a slightly more detailed reading of the first six homilies in his 'Salvation and sanctification in the Book of Homilies', *Reformed Theological Review*, 62.1 (2003), pp. 14-28.

the homilies are presented anonymously. Book II was likewise gathered to reinforce an official position, this time as part of the Elizabethan settlement. First published in 1563, it initially contained a further 20 homilies. Whereas Book I reads like a miniature *summa*, majestically encompassing the sweep of human misery and salvation, faith and works, and the rudiments of a Christian ethical vision; Book II strikes out more as a manual for the right and proper (i.e. Protestant) regulation of church practice, for example including a homily on 'repairing and keeping clean the Church' (II/3), which turns out to mean both practical matters of repair but also keeping them clean of Roman practices and accoutrements (as per also the largely anti-Roman in nature 'Against excess of apparel'; II/6). The Book moves on to a basic series of seasonal sermons, for Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Whitsunday, and other occasions; before culminating in a very extended homily 'Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion' (II/21), which in six lengthy parts attempts to negotiate the proper relationship between church and state under the Word of God.⁵ Book II's attempt to respond to the Catholic interruption of the Marian period (1553-58) is amply attested by devoting its far and away longest homily to the subject of 'Idolatry', by which it again referred to various Roman church practices (II/2). Nevertheless, there is a recognition that Book II is in some degree of tension with Book I, in its attention to the Church

⁵ It originated separately as a response to the events of 1569-70 and Pope Pius V's *Regnans in excelsis* bull. Homily 21 was listed in the 1571 English translation of the articles, which thereby fixed the full list.

year and some of its particular perspectives on faith as gift or achievement.⁶

The complex publication history of the *Homilies* is traced by various scholars.⁷ Ian Lancashire notes that Book I was published in 1547, and then again in '1548, 1549, and 1551 so as to ensure that every church in the realm had a copy'. He also states that in 1548, perhaps in response to restlessness among congregations, who were officially banned from hearing any other than the authorised sermons, the 12 homilies were subdivided into 32 parts of more appropriate and preachable length.

During the reign of Mary, Edmund Bonner replaced Cranmer's work with a collection of 13 homilies defending the Catholic perspective (*A Profitable and Necessarye Doctryne*, 1555). The label 'Catholic' is in some ways precisely a point of controversy at this stage in the Reformation, in the sense that early Protestant reformers saw themselves as unashamedly 'Protestant' but representing the true (and obscured) tradition of the Church Catholic.⁸ Bonner's case illustrates this in that his fiercely Marian rebuttal – which included the pursuit of

⁶ So Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture. From the Reformation to the Present* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), p. 11.

⁷ I am indebted here to The University of Toronto's *Renaissance Electronic Texts* series critical on-line edition of the Books, which includes a helpful summary by Ian Lancashire, 'A Brief History of the Homilies' (revised 1997); at www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/ret/homilies/elizhom3.html Accessed January 17 2017. See also Ronald B. Bond, 'A Two-Edged Sword: The History of the Tudor Homilies', the first chapter of his edited edition: *Certain Sermons or Homilies (1547) and A Homily Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion (1570). A Critical Edition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), pp. 3-25.

⁸ The early Church of England was not in this sense a *via media* between Catholicism and Protestantism: that is the contribution of the Oxford Movement in the late 19th century; see Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, p. xxiii.

all those in possession of or circulating copies of the *Homilies* – must be set alongside his own authorship of one of the homilies in Book I: ‘Of Christian love and charity’ (I/6), which reappeared with only minor amendments as the fifth homily in the 1555 Marian volume.⁹ The supremacy of love, it turns out, leant neither to the Catholic nor Protestant side.

State sanction of official homilies was clearly seen as an obvious way of propagating right doctrine (which is not the same as saying that the homilies were a tool of the state to further political ends¹⁰). Null likens the *Book of Homilies*, in this context, to ‘a manifesto of the regime’s theological agenda’, and, in the Edwardian case at least, as ‘Like Mao’s “Little Red Book”, ... the means of its revolutionary implementation’.¹¹ It is no surprise, then, that Elizabeth rapidly encouraged the republication of Book I from 1559 onwards, and assigned the new homilies in 1563. A delayed authorisation of Book II suggested only that clergy should use them, not that no others were permitted, so in fact it is hard to know to what extent the Book II homilies were ever preached. Indeed, my interest in the homilies as a source for hermeneutical reflection is dependent largely on them as theological texts (i.e. as ‘manifesto’, in Null’s term), and it is not

⁹ For analysis of the Marian context see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), esp pp. 543–46 on Bonner. On Bonner’s authorship of I/6 see Griffiths, ‘Editor’s Preface’, p. xxvii (n. 12 below).

¹⁰ Stacey makes this point persuasively. See Caroline M. Stacey, ‘Justification by Faith in the Two Books of Homilies (1547 and 1571)’, *Anglican Theological Review* 83.2 (2001), pp. 255–79, esp pp. 255–56.

¹¹ Null, ‘Official Tudor Homilies’, p. 348.

necessarily possible to draw broader homiletical conclusions about the interpretative moves appropriate to sermons in general from a study of these particular texts.

There were 27 separate editions of the homilies between 1559 and 1571, until the Puritans urged they be thrown out, in their 1572 *Admonition to the Parliament*. Although possibly thereafter waning in use, the homilies were published several more times up to 1595, and then James I authorised a reprinting in 1623 under the title *Certaine Sermons or Homilies appointed to be read in Churches, In the time of the late Queene Elizabeth of famous memory*. This marks the end of the period of relatively (though not excessively) fluid textual tradition, and forms the bench-mark for later critical editions.

There are two subsequent major editions. One is the complete edition edited by John Griffiths in 1859, which includes some text-critical apparatus to distinguish changes in various earlier printings, and incorporates a lengthy preface discussing the variant editions up to and including 1623.¹² The other is Ronald Bond's full critical edition of Book I (as well as the final added homily to Book II) in 1987, though in fact this marks a deliberate return to the the original spelling of the Edwardian edition(s), and is thus perhaps of less use to the general reader than Griffiths' work.¹³ Facsimile reprints are available, often offering no indication of their textual version, and there is on-line

¹² John Griffiths, *The Two Books of Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859), especially the 'The Editor's Preface', pp. vii-lxxvi. This edition is available in pdf form on-line at https://prydain.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/the_two_books_of_homilies.pdf Accessed January 17 2017.

¹³ Bond (ed.), *Certain Sermons or Homilies*.

access to various text versions, including one attempt to offer some of the homilies in updated contemporary language.¹⁴ In the present piece all citations are from Griffiths' 1859 edition, although short titles of the individual homilies are used.¹⁵

3. Cranmer's Involvement: Identifying Key Texts

Cranmer was responsible for Book I, and 'adopted the *loci* method of scriptural exposition ... the first six described the fundamentals of the way of salvation', moving through scripture, sin, three homilies on justification, and one on love; while 'the second six addressed important aspects of Christian living'.¹⁶ The homilies are not attributed in the Book, but it is accepted that Cranmer wrote the three on justification: 'Of the salvation of mankind' (I/3); 'Of the true and lively faith' (I/4); and 'Of good works' (I/5), as well as the initial homily on the reading of scripture.¹⁷

Several of Cranmer's writings are gathered in a 1964 compendium, a good half of which is given over to his 'Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of Sacrament' (1550).¹⁸ Interestingly, none of the homilies of Book I are focused on the sacraments, although that

¹⁴ See the draft selections at <http://footstoolpublications.com/Homilies/index.htm> Accessed January 17 2017.

¹⁵ Listed in an appendix at the end of this article. Griffiths gives full meandering titles to each homily.

¹⁶ Null, 'Official Tudor Homilies', p. 354.

¹⁷ e.g. Null, 'Official Tudor Homilies', p. 354; cf also Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer. A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 372.

¹⁸ G.E. Duffield (ed), *The Work of Thomas Cranmer* (Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics 2; Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1964), cf pp. 45-231.

is a focus of some of the works of Book II.¹⁹ Of direct interest to our own focus on the hermeneutics of the homilies, however, is Cranmer's 'Preface to the Bible' from 1539/1540, which clearly finds echoes in homily I/1 on the reading of Scripture.

While it is doubtless true that all of Book I reflects to some extent the convictions of Cranmer's presiding theological mind, the necessary constraints of the present discussion suggest a more limited focus on a selection of key texts. There are three by Cranmer, and a fourth that merits notice. First is the opening homily itself, directed to the 'reading and knowledge of Holy Scripture'. Secondly, by way of further illumination, his preface to the Great Bible expands on some of the same ideas. The Bible in question is the 1539 Coverdale version of Tyndale's incomplete translation, making good some of the Old Testament absences in Tyndale's work, though without recourse to the same attention to Hebrew texts that characterised Tyndale's (sometimes controversial) attempt to work from the originals. Cranmer was greatly excited to see at long last an English language Bible made widely available, and wrote his 'Preface' for its second printing in 1540.²⁰ Thirdly, Cranmer's own three homilies concerning justification afford the opportunity to see how his declared approach to scripture looked in practice. Fourthly we should note a post-Cranmer text, the homily intriguingly entitled 'An information for them which take

¹⁹ MacCulloch says this is because plans to reform the eucharist were not far advanced in 1547: *Thomas Cranmer*, p. 372.

²⁰ See, briefly, Jonathan Dean (ed.), *God Truly Worshipped. Thomas Cranmer and his Writings* (Canterbury Studies in Spiritual Theology; Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012), pp. 41-47, which incorporates some extracts from Cranmer's Preface itself.

offence at certain places of the Holy Scripture' (II/10). The authorship of this homily is unknown, although Griffiths remarks that 'A few sentences near the beginning of this homily are translated from a tract of Erasmus'.²¹ Space will permit only brief attention to this interesting text, sufficient to highlight some of its differences from Cranmer's own work. The next task is therefore to offer careful readings of these texts just identified

4 Towards an Anglican Hermeneutics: Reading the Key Texts

4.1 'A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture' (I/1)

This relatively brief homily appears (as a result of the editing process noted above) in two parts.²² Part 1 opens with a resounding affirmation of the perfection of Holy Scripture: 'there is not truth nor doctrine necessary for our justification and everlasting salvation, but that is or may be drawn out of that fountain and well of truth'. (7) Scripture will thus appear sweet and healing to all who seek to know God, and will only seem 'bitter' to those whose minds are 'corrupted with long custom of sin and love of this world'. (7) That phrase – 'is or may be drawn out' – echoes into the exhortation: 'Let us diligently search for the well of life in the books of the New and Old Testament' (7), an image that resonates with the pursuit of life-giving water in the Sinai

²¹ Griffiths, 'Editor's Preface', p. xxxiv.

²² See Griffiths, *The Two Books of Homilies*, pp. 7-10 and pp. 11-15. Page references to this and all subsequent homilies cited are included in parentheses in the text.

wilderness, and perhaps the Pauline figure of Christ being the rock that truly nourished the weary Israelites (1 Cor 10:4). Such life-giving riches need to be sought out: they do not necessarily lie on the surface of the text. Cranmer supports these initial contentions by citing John Chrysostom and Fulgentius.

As a result, Christians should spend much time with Scripture, which Cranmer then characterises by way of several scriptural citations, to show that Scripture blesses us; makes us holy; gives life; judges us; and is a jewel or treasure, and 'the best part, which Mary did choose' (cf Luke 10:39-42). (9) Drawing on John 14:23, Cranmer then suggests that those who keep the word of Christ will dwell 'in the temple of the blessed Trinity', (9) and that by such continual exposure, Scripture's life-transforming capacity 'is deeply printed and graven in the heart' and 'at length turneth almost into nature'. (10) Part 1 ends with the character-related observation about who can truly be changed in this way by Scripture:

in reading of God's word he most profiteth not always that is most ready in turning of the book, or in saying of it without the book; but he that is most turned into it, that is most inspired with the Holy Ghost, most in his heart and life altered and changed into that thing which he readeth. (10)

Several such virtues are then rehearsed in terms of vices to be avoided: pride, wrath, covetousness, pursuit of worldly pleasure. The climax of part 1 thus draws together the two key points: repeated exposure to Scripture and transformation of character:

to be short, there is nothing that more maintaineth godliness of the mind, and driveth away ungodliness, than doth the continual reading or hearing of God's word, if it be joined with a godly mind and a good affection to know and follow God's will. (10)

Cranmer does not offer here an account of which is cause and which is effect, but rather simply affirms both: scripture transforms the reader 'if it be joined with' a reader pursuing the transformation afforded by scripture. Without scripture the reader is lost, but even with scripture 'without a single eye, pure intent, and good mind nothing is allowed for good before God'. (10)

Might one say then that in this opening section, scripture is sufficient for all that we need to know for justification and salvation; whereas scripture is necessary but not sufficient for the transformation of one's life, since a reader receptive to the work of God is required? My own view is that this is precisely right, and in the terminology of later centuries might be parsed as a hermeneutical circle or spiral that recognises that the character that readers bring to the holy text is in turn shaped by the encounter with that text, not as an either/or cause and effect, but as an ongoing interaction.²³ Admittedly Cranmer would not have expressed the matter this way, since in his view there was a different reason why there was no tension between divine agency through Scripture and the human work of understanding it: namely

²³ I defend this in my *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), esp pp. 28-34, 206-10, including reflection that such character-orientated concerns are markedly different from, for example, Lutheran readings of scripture (pp. 33, 209).

that both these aspects were subsumed under the one governing predestinarian rubric that the Holy Spirit would always provoke the requisite receptivity among the elect.²⁴ As I shall suggest further below, the specific case of the 'work' of reading scripture (to which, after all, Cranmer's homily is exhorting its hearers) actually suggests various ways in which this classic Reformation emphasis will have trouble accounting for the phenomena of one's own reading of scripture taking place amidst a crowd of witnesses of other readings, not all of which are in agreement, even among the elect.

Part 2 of the homily explores a range of potential problems that an imagined interlocutor might raise after this opening account. First Cranmer affirms that we recognise the need for experts to study their books (such as philosophers who read philosophy), so clearly Christians should be ashamed not to study (or at least attend to, perhaps by hearing) scripture. Secondly, he deals with two 'excuses': that 'frail and fearful' readers desist from such study lest they might fall into error, and also that scripture is so difficult that only experts ('clerks and learned men', (12)) should study it.

The first excuse is met with Matthew 22:29, Jesus' rebuke to the Sadducees that they did not know scripture and were thus in error. It follows that you will only overcome ignorance through reading

²⁴ I am indebted here to the fine discussion of Ashley Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 120-33. Null writes that though Cranmer 'did make some straightforward statements about the necessary role of the human will in producing the fruits of true faith, these are best understood as descriptive of what the supernatural gift of justifying faith would inevitably cause to happen in the elect'. (p. 129) Null is here exploring how, for Cranmer, the elect and the justified are one and the same.

scripture (or hearing it – since for many it will be at one remove, presumably, mediated by the preacher). As for the fear of error, Cranmer offers this guidance:

I shall show you how you may read it without danger of error. Read it humbly with a meek and a lowly heart, to the intent you may glorify God ... and read it not without daily praying to God, that he would direct you reading to good effect. (12)

This is the same emphasis on readerly character that Cranmer established in part 1, here turned to the purpose of encouraging fearful readers.

The second excuse is met with the recognition that there are easy passages of scripture for all to begin with ('low valleys, plain ways ... as also high hills and mountains', 13), and that God will not leave the devoted reader without help. Here he turns again to Chrysostom, citing a homily on Genesis, where Chrysostom cites Acts 8 and the story of the sending of Philip to help the Ethiopian understand the text he was reading (Acts 8:30-35). What of those who lack such an envoy? Cranmer adds that in such cases 'God himself from above will give light unto our minds, and teach us those things that are necessary for us'. (14) He also draws comfort from Augustine's comment in *de doctrina Christiana* that what is obscure in one place is always, if it is necessary to know, made plain in another place. In short: by the reading of scripture the weak are strengthened, the strong are comforted, and only the ignorant, the sick (with 'hate'), or those 'so ungodly' are not thus affected.

A concluding paragraph takes up many of the points made in a spirit of thankfulness and renewed determination to meditate day and night on scripture. An initial attempt to summarise the key elements of 'fruitful reading' (which is not quite the title phrase but is perhaps intended?) might name them as three: 1. persistent 'dwelling' in scripture, on the grounds that it is perfect and full of blessing; 2. reading as a reader of good character desiring transformation; and 3. reading with the help of those of good character themselves or, in their absence, of God.

Clearly Cranmer is angling some of the thrust of this homily against the Roman emphasis on the priest as mediator of what the believer needs to know, and saying instead that it is scripture that holds this place. More specifically, in the context of late medieval provision of approved homilies (a practice that pre-dated the Reformation), Cranmer is placing scripture at the centre as opposed to pious stories about the saints and their miracles.²⁵ Both these contexts make point (3) above slightly intriguing, since he wants to say that struggling readers may turn for guidance to those more advanced, but equally wants to avoid suggesting that the result is that one needs the priest or a miracle-working saint for this task.

In the end it seems that several elements of a hermeneutical position are kept in play, unresolved in their tension.

4.2 Cranmer's 'Preface to the Bible'

²⁵ See especially for this point Susan Wabuda, 'Bishops and the Provision of Homilies, 1520 to 1547', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25.3 (1994), pp. 551-566.

The 'Preface to the Bible' presages some of the above homily, in extensive reliance on Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus.²⁶ The Preface addresses two sorts of readers: those too slow, in need of a spur; and those too quick, in need of a bridle. (30) He effects a rebuke of both: the one that fails to attend to reading the Bible in English, and the other that endlessly disputes or otherwise slanders what they read. The former case is addressed largely by way of citing Chrysostom, to the effect that 'the reading of Scriptures is a great and strong bulwark or fortress against sin'. (36) Cranmer then rather delightfully excuses himself from adding much more on this point because to do so would be to offer a whole Bible again rather than a Preface, and then he briefly rehearses some of the same points about the riches to be found in scripture that he would later use in I/1. (36-37) The second case brings Cranmer to reflect that no good gift escapes being abused, in this case by vain and frivolous argument. The remedy here is provided by Gregory of Nazianzus, who rehearses how futile much argument of his own time regarding scripture proved to be. Cranmer cites him again with the basic suggestion in response: start all Bible reading with the fear of God. (42). The result, Cranmer foresees, will be just as David writes in Psalm 50 (in fact vv. 16-23), that those who approach while knowing their unworthiness shall find themselves reproved and instructed by God. (43)

²⁶ 'Preface to the Bible', in Duffield (ed.), *Work of Thomas Cranmer*, pp. 30-43. The reliance is clear in the version reproduced in Dean (ed.), *God Truly Worshipped*, pp. 42-47, which omits the two long citations and thereby reduces the work by over 50%. Page references are to Duffield's version.

It is interesting that this earlier statement maps a simple pair of options: under-use and over-zealous use; and puts forward the fear of God as the key response. The presenting question is clearly how to encourage Bible reading in the vernacular without letting loose uncontrolled (literally: unbridled) over-reading. The focus on the reader's disposition is thus already in place, though not yet developed in the more detailed character-related terms of I/1. The navigation between two extremes, though, is a characteristic formal move of Cranmer's approach, as we have seen here and will see again in the other homilies he wrote.

4.3 Cranmer's Homilies on Justification: Hermeneutical Reflections

Homilies 3, 4 and 5 of Book I are arguably the centre-piece of the whole project of authorising certain homilies for use. All that can be done here is to attend to specific questions of the use of scripture in them.²⁷

I/3 explores salvation, and presumes upon the broad scriptural sweep canvassed in I/2 on 'misery', wherein it was demonstrated that all godly people in scripture nevertheless thought appropriately humbly of themselves; and furthermore that it was persistently recognised that righteousness truly belonged to God alone: 'Let us therefore acknowledge before God, as we be indeed, miserable and wretched sinners'. (20) I/3 picks up from there with a strong statement that we must therefore seek righteousness elsewhere than in our own deeds. Cranmer turns immediately to Romans, focused on Romans 3

²⁷ A persuasive reading of their core focus on justification is offered by Stacey, 'Justification by Faith in the Two Books of Homilies'.

and other statements about the weakness of the law (8:3-4 and 10:4). Galatians and Ephesians 2:8-9 then loom large in arguing for grace over against works, which Cranmer then illustrates with reference to a range of patristic authors, to demonstrate (presumably) that he was recovering the truly Catholic reading of scripture over against Rome. The importance of the doctrine of justification is then affirmed, though in fact without reference to scriptural warrant, but clearly in phrasing drawn from immersion in scripture. The final part of the homily emphasises the supreme significance of this one true understanding, and responds to charges that it leads to 'either evil works or no good works', what Cranmer calls 'carnal liberty'. (33) For Cranmer:

the right and true Christian faith is, not only to believe that holy Scripture and all the foresaid articles of our faith are true, but also to have a sure trust and confidence in God's merciful promises to be saved from everlasting damnation by Christ. (34)

It is interesting to note that the Old Testament plays no role in this homily (one passing citation from the Psalms not really withstanding), so that whereas it contributed to I/2's depiction of misery, it effectively offers no saving hope. The use of scripture throughout this homily will be familiar to those for whom a systematic presentation of the good news of Christ sets the interpretative agenda and determines which texts are deemed to speak to the matter at hand.

I/4 explores 'true, lively, and Christian faith', which means in the first instance faith with works, to which end the spectre of James 2 is contrasted with images of fruitfulness (including, in the longest

citation, Jeremiah 17:7-8, a parallel in part to Psalm 1 (39)). A second section seeks to demonstrate its central claim that 'all holy Scripture agreeably beareth witness that a true lively faith in Christ doth bring forth good works' (42) by way of rehearsing the Old Testament story under the rubric of Hebrews 11's retelling of it, and building to a lengthy citation of several texts beginning with Matthew 25:46 on the sheep and the goats. The third part of the sermon is a call to self-examination: 'try and examine our faith, what it is' (46), though interestingly in the peroration Cranmer says 'try it by your living; look upon the fruits that cometh of it' (47), and many other tests, not one of which refers the hearer back to scriptural texts. The reason for this needs to be considered in connection with the following homily.

I/5 ties the preceding two homilies together concerning 'good works annexed to faith'. The first part recovers the teaching of Augustine, Ambrose and Chrysostom, to show again that Cranmer is urging no new teaching. The second part, of most interest to us, asks the question: 'what manner of works they be which spring out of true faith'? (52) The answer, says Cranmer, is best shown us by Jesus, and not by the multiplied rules and observances of the Scribes and Pharisees. Intriguingly, the answer turns out to be the ten commandments, five of which (numbers 5-9 in Protestant numbering) are cited, along with Leviticus' 'love thy neighbour as thyself' (53),²⁸ before this summary:

²⁸ Lev 19:18; obviously also cited in Matthew 22:39 and parallels, but in context Cranmer is referring to Christ's citing of OT precedent.

this is to be taken for a most true lesson taught by Christ's own mouth, that the works of the moral commandments of God be the very true works of faith which lead to the blessed life to come. (53)

This Old Testament answer is perhaps surprising, although it fits with the rehearsal of either the ten commandments or their New Testament summary at the beginning of the BCP communion liturgy. The remainder of this homily explores two alternative conceptions of what is required in the way of good works: scriptural examples of those who crowded out the commandments with the traditions of men; and then examples contemporary to Cranmer of 'innumerable superstitiousness' (59, though he has a stab at enumerating quite a lot of superstitiousness) and, with a sense of increasing inevitability, 'some other kinds of papistical superstitions and abuses'. (61)

The overall logic of homilies 4 and 5 is therefore clear: good works are essential, but they are fruit and not root; and scripture reveals the standard by which good works may be judged: it is the ten commandments, as mediated by Christ, rather than Pharisaical or Romish traditions. Hence the conclusion of the homily on good works, which begins 'as you have any zeal to the right and pure honouring of God, ... apply yourselves chiefly above all things to read and to hear God's word.' (64)

In terms of the hermeneutics, it is interesting that the character of the reader has dropped out of the picture, and of rather more significance now is the insistence that scripture sets the terms of evaluation rather than tradition. In terms of whether scripture is clear

or difficult, one wonders if Cranmer might have thought that passages from Romans and Galatians that explain justification by faith are those clear passages that determine the darker mysteries of passages that teach good works, all of which are marshalled into order as essential once put in their proper place. One continuity between I/1 and these three homilies is the concern to clarify who is a trustworthy guide in the matter of reading scripture rightly. But now the (implicit) answer seems simply to be: those who understand the doctrine of justification rightly. How (hermeneutically) significant might it be that the succeeding I/6, on Christian love and charity, which reinscribes a matter of character as essential to the Christian life, is the homily written by Bonner and adapted with little trouble to the Roman/Marian rebuttal of the theological teaching of I/3–5?

On its own terms, Cranmer's approach has its own hermeneutical logic. He is persistently exercised by the need to avoid suggesting that human effort (even the effort of faith) contributes in any substantive way to securing justification. As Null points out, 'Significantly, at no point in this [the homily on salvation's] description of justification did Cranmer make any reference to a divine internal act as the basis for the believer's external pardoning by God'.²⁹ For Cranmer, 'solifidianism' (adherence to the doctrine of justification by faith alone) rightly lets faith point to Christ 'as the true extrinsic source

²⁹ Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, p. 215. Null notes scholarly dispute over Cranmer's views here, which he attributes to the nature of the *Homilies* as 'instruction for a popular audience' which thus 'lack the technical theological precision which would have avoided the later scholarly debate over their interpretation'. (p. 214)

for the remission of sins'.³⁰ One could then apply this insight to the work of reading scripture, and argue that the reading of scripture points one to the extrinsic source of rightly understanding the doctrine of justification by faith. However, this will only be a persuasive argument on Cranmer's own terms, since if in the first place one does not think that all human work (including reading scripture) is the ineluctable outworking of the Holy Spirit, well then one would be alert to the possibility that one can apply oneself to scripture, even with zeal, and still read it wrongly, or unhelpfully. As a matter of observation, zealous reading has not turned out to have a uniformly impressive doctrinal track record over the centuries.

In short, it is plausible to suggest that the relationship between the doctrine of justification and scripture is likely to have been worked out in connection with obtaining the right view of justification, and that therefore the homily on reading scripture is more likely a *post hoc* reflection on the way that the appeal to scripture works rather than an *a priori* hermeneutical treatise from which one then proceeds to wonder what justification might look like. Cranmer would not be the last theologian whose appeal to scripture in practice is not always the same as his more theoretical statements of how it should be done.

4.4 'An Information for them which take Offence at certain places of the Holy Scripture' (II/10)

³⁰ Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, p. 219. My reading of Cranmer's 'solifidianism' is informed by Null's treatment (and cites above his definition of the term from p. 5).

As noted above, this text is not Cranmer's, but it is of interest to our specific hermeneutical focus, and so merits brief consideration. Homily II/10 rehearses several objections brought forth to scripture, in two parts, essentially relating to the Old and New Testaments respectively.³¹ Much of the Cranmerian affirmation of the importance of reading scripture is reaffirmed, and I shall not dwell on that. The opening reaffirmation of these things is couched in terms of Satan attacking the Church at precisely the point of the great gift of Scripture. (368-71) As a result, two basic objections are considered.

First we have the largely Old Testament issue of 'those places that men are offended at for the homeliness and grossness of speech'. (372) The texts under review seem somewhat random: Deut. 25:5-10 for the spitting in a brother's face; Psalm 75:10 and the breaking of horns (explained as the pulling down of the powerful); Psalm 60:8's 'Moab is my washpot' which was clearly made light of by 'Christian men ...[acting] as ruffians' (373); the examples of polygamy in Genesis, which the reader is assured were 'not for satisfying their carnal and fleshly lusts, but to have many children' (374, suggesting that they thereby hoped to bring forth the seed that would crush the serpent); and finally a markedly more interesting analysis of the problematic moral examples of Noah, Lot, Abraham and others, in their deeds that did indeed fall short. Here the view is opposed that we might imitate them. They did offend God highly, and 'We ought then to learn by them this profitable lesson', namely that if they could not refrain from

³¹ Page references are to Griffiths (ed.), *Homilies*, pp. 368-81.

‘horrible sin’, how much more must we be alert to our need for grace.
(375)

The second section turns to the offence caused by the way that ‘Christ’s precepts should seem to destroy all order in governance’.
(376) The Sermon on the Mount is a prime candidate for causing this offence, but hearers are urged to seek an ‘inward meaning’ that acknowledges God’s truth in such apparently problematic sayings. We then turn to Psalm 1 to consider three categories of readers who fail to do this: the ungodly, sinners, and ‘scorners’. The first two may repent and turn to God, but the third, as evidenced in a range of stories from 2 Chronicles and the New Testament, have no hope of repentance. The purpose of this rather odd disquisition is that it might ‘suffice to admonish us, and cause us henceforth to reverence God’s holy Scriptures’. (379) The problem, it is then said rather bluntly, is that we too easily mock scripture, but ‘The more obscure and dark the sayings be to our understanding, the further let us think ourselves to be from God and his Holy Spirit, who was the Author of them’. (380) The obscurity may be historical (‘refer them [sc. obscure texts] to the times and people for whom they served’, 380), or because we have not sought out spiritual meanings. Two final examples from David round out the homily: his desire for the destruction of his enemies (Ps 144:6) is really a spiritual wish for the destruction of error; and his hatred of the wicked is in fact a perfect hatred, to which we cannot aspire.

The argument of this homily does not cohere well. The first part is a miscellaneous set of responses to verses that were clearly mocked in some way or other. The second sets out on the theme of Christ’s lack

of utility for civic governance, but retrenches to further reflections on how the mocking reader misses the depth of the matter. That may be so, but no actual help is given regarding Christ's teaching, and further random examples are adduced of how deeper meanings illuminate the way past the mocking critiques of others. It is perhaps possible to see how such an approach is tied to Cranmer's in I/1 regarding the character of the reader, but in many ways the interesting hermeneutical work has already been done before any of the texts are actually considered, and II/10 is largely the execution of a rearguard action for which historical-cultural distance and deeper spiritual significance are rather unfortunately handled as if they were hermeneutically interchangeable. Even so, in broad outline, we see here again the way in which scripture's voice is folded into convictions driven from elsewhere. What is less clear than in Cranmer's own work is how scripture might offer its own pressure to redirect established readings. The speed with which the emphasis has developed from Cranmer's delicate balancing act to this more one-sided perspective might serve as a reminder of how easy it is to let the interaction of text and reader become too swayed by one side of the picture only.

5 Conclusion: Cranmer's Ecclesiological Hermeneutics

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the wider significance of the hermeneutics of Cranmer's homilies reflects in miniature the ecclesiological framing of the Church of England and, in due time, Anglicanism.

Greer is right to say that ‘Cranmer’s claims for the Bible proved far more ambiguous and complicated than one might at first suppose.’³² Indeed, scripture is upheld as the prime authority, but this turns out not to furnish the Church of England with clear guidance on quite a range of matters (and how much more so today). What we see is Cranmer insisting that attention to – or dwelling with – scripture will guide the Church to the right understanding of gospel, but having to reckon with how to explain over-attention (in the 1540 Preface), or in the end how to explain attention that leads to the wrong conclusions. The key is to read with good character, parsed as the ‘fear of God’ in 1540 but developed into a wider-ranging emphasis on character in the homilies, and then attending to the right exemplars or helpers in the task of interpretation. Here the challenge is to explain why this is not the same as defaulting to the best of the church’s tradition.

In my judgment, Cranmer is unable to demonstrate this, for the simple reason that it cannot be demonstrated. On a formal level it is possible to demarcate, as Cranmer does, between those who are more godly and therefore appropriate models, and those who represent the church tradition purely by virtue of their office. But in practice it is not clear how one demonstrates the superiority of criteria for judging those more godly over those in official authority other than by presuming that one somehow has independent access to what the text means that is not mediated or shaped by the context in which the reading takes place. Cranmer does not couch this argument in the terms of later

³² Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, p. 10.

hermeneutical theory, of course, but he lays out fairly clearly the elements of the same issues. His appeal to the example of Philip helping the Ethiopian eunuch brings him right up to the point at issue: What if no one is available to help the reader today? Answer: God will offer direct help. Of course, if this were really so, then it is less obvious why anyone needs a Philip figure in the first instance, since direct divine illumination seems in many ways to be a preferable option. It is true that there would be the benefit to Philip and other messengers in having to explain scripture, but this seems an odd justification in terms of the clarity of what is communicated to the reader.

Then, as we saw, when it comes to appealing to scripture in the homilies on justification, it seems that character drops out of the picture anyway, and the (relevant) texts simply drive all readers to see the Protestant point of view. But part of the demonstration that it is the correct view is that one can show that it goes back to the Fathers too: so the true reading is after all the (properly defined) 'catholic' one.

It could be that Cranmer's hermeneutical approach (at least insofar as it is on display in the relevant homilies) is caught up in precisely analogous moves to Anglican ecclesiology in general, once the categories of 'Anglican' and 'ecclesiology' become available for discussion. MacCulloch's conclusion to his study of Cranmer bears consideration in this regard:

He [Cranmer] would not have known what Anglicanism meant, and he probably would not have approved if the meaning had been explained to him, but without his contribution the unending

dialogue of Protestantism and Catholicism which forms Anglican identity would not have been possible.³³

I think we see this with his approach(es) to scripture that we have considered above. There is an unending dialogue between on the one hand the appeal to the primacy of the text and the specific doctrines it teaches, and on the other, the demonstration that this is right because it results in what we recognise to be the right way of reading, believing, and living that the church has always recognised. So in the end, to put the matter in broad-brush terms, Protestant hermeneutics serve to regulate and moderate the Catholic framework within which they perforce operate; and Catholic hermeneutics serve to regulate and moderate the Protestant convictions to which they inevitably give life. The role of scripture in such a context is not straightforwardly to serve as source or generator of theological convictions – convictions that may well be held precisely because they have been passed down through the ecclesial tradition. Rather, the role of scripture is more of a check and authoritative court of appeal. In other words: if Cranmer believes the doctrine of justification as the true teaching of the church, it matters to him that he can demonstrate it from scripture, but this need not be the route by which he came to the belief in the first place.

Such an approach to scripture sits well with the belief that the church within which scripture is read must be ever Catholic and ever Protestant. Cranmer operated in a context where the confusions of contemporary Roman practice obscured what counted as ‘catholic’ in

³³ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, p. 629.

this sense. As a result he is relentlessly Protestant in the formulation of his doctrine of Scripture, but simply unable to dispense with the Catholic framework that he assumes at key points. He did not seek a *via media* between Protestant and Catholic, being consistently Reformed, hence the stern wording of a collect such as the one for the second Sunday in Advent that looks at first sight as if it resolutely factors out the church altogether:

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them; that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our saviour Jesus Christ.

But a little attention to context will cause us to recognise that the act of ‘hearing’ is almost certainly ecclesially located, as indeed are the acts of reading, marking and learning – all beholden at that time to the teaching offices of the church. Furthermore, once the questions of the proper interpretation of Scripture come into view, the result is an approach to scripture that is evidently both text-focused *and* church/tradition-focused. That result is the unsquared circular embrace of right readers pursuing right readings as adjudged by right readers.

Perhaps the congruence between Cranmer’s hermeneutics in the homilies and Anglican ecclesiology is not so very surprising. Likewise, though the *Books of Homilies* may not serve the church well today as sermons waiting to be preached, they offer rich material for reflection upon the nature of Christian hermeneutics in one particular ecclesial

tradition, and indicate an Anglican approach to scripture that does indeed still have much to offer.

Appendix

The Contents of the two Books of Homilies

I adopt a numbering system of 'I' for Book I; 'II' for Book II' and roman numerals to indicate which sermon is intended. Titles for Book I are generally abbreviated from Griffiths' edition (1859) by the omission of phrases such as 'A Sermon/Exhortation/Homily ...' and additional phrases, to match the abbreviations used for Book II by article 35 of the 39 Articles (where, below, * indicates more normal abbreviations used in works on the *Homilies*).

Book I (1547)

- I/1 The reading and knowledge of Holy Scripture
- I/2 Of the misery of all mankind
- I/3 Of the salvation of mankind
- I/4 Of the true, lively, and Christian faith
- I/5 Of good works
- I/6 Of Christian love and charity
- I/7 Against swearing and perjury
- I/8 How dangerous it is to fall from God
- I/9 Against the fear of death
- I/10 Concerning good order and obedience
- I/11 Against whoredom and adultery (uncleanness)

I/12 Against contention and brawling

Book II (1563/1571)

- II/1 Of the right use of the church
- II/2 Against peril of idolatry
- II/3 Of repairing and keeping clean of churches
- II/4 Of good works: first of fasting
- II/5 Against gluttony and drunkenness
- II/6 Against excess of apparel
- II/7 Of prayer
- II/8 Of the place and time of prayer
- II/9 Of common prayer and sacraments
- II/10 Of the reverend estimation of God's Word (*Or: *An information of them which take offence at certain places of the Holy Scripture*)
- II/11 Of alms-doing
- II/12 Of the Nativity of Christ
- II/13 Of the Passion of Christ (*for Good Friday)
- II/14 Of the Resurrection of Christ (*for Easter Day)
- II/15 Of the worthy receiving of the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ
- II/16 Of the gifts of the Holy Ghost (*for Whitsunday)
- II/17 For the rogation days
- II/18 Of the state of matrimony
- II/19 Against idleness (*= II/20 in article 35)
- II/20 Of repentance (*and true reconciliation unto God; = II/19 in article 35)
- II/21 Against rebellion (*= *Against disobedience and wilful rebellion*; = 1571 addition)